

Lesson Ten

Review from Previous Lesson: In Lesson Nine we looked at Psalm 105, which demonstrates how it is that we often perceive a “disconnect” between what we know that God says, and the way we see reality taking shape. In theory, we can say that God’s words do indeed actively shape reality; but often we feel disappointed when we can’t see that His promises have affected our situations or those of others, at least in any way that we can tell. We observed that what God says doesn’t always “seem” to match up with what we see Him doing in our lives. In addition, Psalm 105 presented us with the startling notion that this apparent disparity is actually a way that God proves our faith in Him, contrasting it with our faith in our own ability to analyze situations.

The Problem: Not only does God’s word “test” people, quite often our difficult situations seem to contradict the promises of God. We feel at the mercy of situations, knowing that while we can trust God to save us eventually in heaven, nonetheless we are not sure how to look at a seemingly hopeless earthly situation in a biblically-informed way.

Why the problem persists in churches: Many Christians see faith as an amorphous “feeling” instead of a link to eternal realities. Many do not believe that there are Biblical parallels, examples of people in the Bible who handled the contradictions that seemed to oppose the promises of God.

Underlying Assumptions As Expressed in Everyday Language:

1. God would never make two statements that seem to contradict each other.
2. I don’t know anyone in the Bible who had as many setbacks as I’ve had.
3. Doesn’t the Bible teach that if you just love Him enough and keep His commandments, He will bless you? Then why am I having so much trouble?
4. I must be doing something wrong I don’t know about. It must be my fault that I have so many difficulties in life.

Background Reading Before Teaching This Lesson: The teacher must be familiar with the life of Abraham in Genesis chapter 11:26 through Genesis 22:19. (To save time, the sections of this reading which have directly to do with the lesson are: Genesis 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, and 22.)

As you read, notice the three-part structure of faith as exemplified in Abraham’s life. We take seriously his title of “father of the faithful.” He received promises from God, but was faced with situations which seemed to oppose, or at the very least make highly unlikely, the fulfillment of those promises. As you read, note:

- *First*, the types of promises God made to Abraham, and the increasingly-specific nature of those promises.
- *Secondly*, the appearance/development of situations which seemed to contradict those promises.

- *Thirdly*, the way in which God brought about resolution to the situation.

We call this three-part structure “the phases of faith.” Please be familiar with some elemental ideas concerning this structure. Note that it is not a **procedure** (in other words, you can’t reproduce all three phases at will); nor is it a **process** in which one phase leads inevitably to the next phase.

The Lesson

1) If the profile of faith has a roadmap, we can find it most clearly seen in the life of Abraham. Abraham experienced clearly the three phases of faith that we all undergo. Phase 1 is the expression of *Promise* by God; Phase 2 is the period of *Contradiction*, and Phase 3 is the *Resolution* of the trial. These phases are cyclical in our lives as they were in the life of Abraham. He didn’t just have one trial with the three phases, he had many. Like us, he failed in some instances and triumphed in others; but because he was (like us) not under the same cause-and-effect system as the world, God made everything in his life work together for his good as He does for us.

2) In Phase 1, we are given promises from God. 2 Peter 1:4 speaks of the “great and precious promises” God gives us in order to participate in His nature and escape the corruption of the world, and the preceding verse 3 tells us that these promises are the outgrowth of His divine power, which He assures us He transfers to us so that we will have everything we need for both life—yes, everyday life—and godliness. We depend upon so many of those promises: that God will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5), that He will meet all our needs (Philippians 4:19), that He will take care of food and clothing for us (Matthew 6:25-32).

3) Abraham was a man rich in promises. God spoke to him openly about what He wanted to do for Abraham:

- Genesis 12:1-3. Here God promised Abraham guidance to a new place, personal protection against his enemies, and an extended blessing to the whole world through Abraham.
- Genesis 12:7: the promise of at least one child, and a land of inheritance for all his descendants.
- Genesis 13:14 and following: the promise of a specific land and numerous offspring. It is significant that this promise was made to Abraham after he had made a personal sacrifice by letting his nephew Lot choose what looked like a richer land. But afterwards God told Abraham to “walk around” in the land and assured him that everything in all four directions would ultimately be his.
- Genesis 14:21-24. Abraham showed his understanding that these promises would come directly from the hand of God by refusing to be enriched by his enemies.

- Genesis 15:1 and following. Abraham is told to not fear; that God would be a shield for him against all dangers, a great reward for him, that he would have a son from his own body, and that he would have numerous offspring. In addition, just trusting in God to provide what He'd promised would be put on Abraham's account of righteousness—in other words, his "line of credit" with God would be without limits as long as he believed and trusted Him.
- Genesis 15:8-21: In this passage Abraham gets even a map of the boundaries of the land he'll inherit. In addition, Abraham gets confirmation of the promise of God by a covenant that God graphically illustrates by passing between the cut halves of sacrificial animals.

3) As we will see in the life of Abraham, after we know the promises of God, we are inevitably faced with a contradiction to those promises. For Abraham, he knew beyond any doubt that he was to have at least one child to lead to descendants who would inherit all the things that God talked to him about. However, there was one problem. Abraham was very old, and his wife Sarah was sterile. How, he must have wondered, could the promises of God be fulfilled when he was getting old and his wife couldn't have children? It was at this point that Abraham made a strategic mistake that humans often make. He continued to believe that God's promises were valid, that's true; but he decided that he needed to do something to "help God out" in getting those things to become reality. He did not wait but rather took things into his own hands and from that point on brought about a situation that caused him, his wife, his concubine Hagar, his son Ishmael and indeed the entire Near Eastern world to this day great grief. He and Sarah decided not to wait on God but to move things along by letting Hagar enter the picture.

4) He had the promises, but the contradiction he saw – his age, Sarah's age and sterility, perhaps even a loss of hope—led to him not relying on God to resolve the situation, but led to him thinking he ought to do it. (This is not the first time that a contradiction has entered the picture of Abraham's life. Just after Abraham got his very first assurance that God would bless and protect him, Abraham had found himself in a position where he was afraid for his life. In Genesis 12 he was told he'd be made into a great nation, that anyone who challenged or cursed him would be cursed; but as soon as he found himself in a famine he went to Egypt and let his desire for protecting himself lead him to think that it would be best for him to let his wife Sarah be the price of his own survival by letting her become the wife of Pharaoh. Only the direct intervention of God to make sure that His purposes weren't thwarted in spite of Abraham's fears and devices to protect himself saved the day.)

5) But God is persistent in keeping His promises, and even in making more specific promises to Abraham, about His specific will in Abraham's life:

- Genesis 17:1 and following: God reaffirms His own identity, elaborates on His promises and even tells Abraham that He's going to represent him with a new name and that he and Sarai will have new identities as exemplified by the new names. In addition, God institutes the symbol of circumcision and tells Abraham

in effect that the deed to the new land is one that he will wear carved into his own flesh and into the flesh of his descendants—more permanent and irreversible than a tattoo. He also tells Abraham the name of his son who is to be born, and says specifically that Sarah the sterile one will be his mother.

- Genesis 18: As the three angelic visitors elaborate on the promises previously made to Abraham, he is told that not only is a child coming, but even the season of the year in which he is to be born; and Abraham and Sarah are assured that nothing is too hard for the Lord.

6) But immediately when another contradiction emerges, Abraham takes the counsel of his fears and his desire for self protection and again sells Sarah to another man! He has seen God's fury and wrath against Sodom and Gomorrah, seen how God could protect even Lot against the mob and the fire and brimstone; and still he resorts to self protection against Abimelech in order to keep himself alive.

7) But the situation when Sarah returned from Abimelech was about to change. It was true that Abraham was 100 years old, and that Sarah was long past the physical age of childbearing. But God completely overcame those factors which seemed like ironclad contradictions to His promises of a son.

As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." --Romans 4:17-23.

8) With the birth of Isaac we can see clearly the first two phases of faith: the promises of God that were followed by contradictions that were real. Sarah was too old, and so was Abraham. But as in the faith of us all, the contradictions were followed by an inevitable third phase: that of a resolution.

By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.—Hebrews 11:11-12.

9) In the case of the birth of Isaac, God Himself miraculously resolved the situation that Abraham had tried to work out himself with Hagar and with his own reasoning processes when he speculated about Eliezar of Damascus (Genesis 15:2-3).

10) The very fact of the birth of Isaac had a profound effect on the faith of Abraham. He had seen God bring life out of the death of his own body and the deadness of Sarah's womb. Like all resolutions, it was completely satisfying and built the faith of the one who waited for God to resolve the situation. And like all resolutions, it was not just an end in itself: it prepared Abraham for other contradictions in his life. And it prepares us and teaches us about contradictions in our own lives: when we see that God has promised us certain things and then it seems impossible to us that God will keep those promises because of the great weight of the contradictions that seem to oppose them.

11) In the case of Abraham, a greater test would face him. In order for all the promises of progeny and inheritance to come to fruition, Isaac would have to have children of his own. Yet before the time that Isaac married, God told Abraham to take his child, his only child, whom he loved, and offer him on mountain as a burnt offering.

Promise: many descendants through Isaac. Contradiction: Take him to a mountain and offer him as a burnt offering. Where could be the resolution in that? Yet we know from the account in Genesis 22 that Abraham believed that the child and he would return from the place of sacrifice (verse 5) and that God Himself would provide for the sacrifice and all its implications (verse 8). We must not forget the compliance of the young man Isaac who carried the wood, trusted his father, and allowed himself to be tied up and placed on the altar by an aged man he could surely have resisted.

Abraham reasoned that since he'd seen life come out of death, a living child out of the dead womb of Sarah, that life could come out of a sacrifice situation if need be.

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.—Hebrews 11:17-19.

Questions for Discussion with Class

- 1) Briefly outline the promises God made to Abraham before the birth of Isaac.
- 2) What were the contradictions to those promises? Were they real or imagined?
- 3) What does Romans 4:16-24 say about the phases of Abraham's faith?
- 4) What does Hebrews 11:8-12 say about the phases of Abraham's faith?
- 5) We studied the life of Joseph last week. Explain the phases of faith in his life.
- 6) Given what you've learned about the phases of faith, how would you evaluate Romans 4:12, which tells us that we actually walk in the footsteps of Abraham?

- 7) Can you think of how God overcame a contradiction to fulfill a promise in your life?
- 8) Apparently Abraham reasoned from a completed phase-structure (promise to have a child, contradiction of childlessness up until old age, resolution via the birth of Isaac) when, years later, he took Isaac up to the mountain. That previous experience thus became part of his thinking when he was faced with a new contradiction (to take his son to the mountain to sacrifice him.) Similarly, how should your answer in question #7 – a resolution – help formulate your thinking about a new contradiction you might face?

“Yeah, but..... “

Learning to identify the phases of faith is helpful, but what I really want to know is how to deal with that middle phase, in which my circumstances seem to contradict the Biblical promises God made to believers. How can I survive these contradictions?